

ON LINE *opinion* - Australia's e-journal of social and political debate

The spectre of terrorism

By Bill Calcutt

Posted Friday, 17 October 2014

A defining feature of the arc of modern history has been the capacity of humans to reflect on and learn from the failures of the past, and to (slowly) move beyond the fear and violence of brutish survival to a civilised society that values respect, progress, compassion and social harmony. One of the greatest lessons of the 20th century is the resilience of the human spirit in the face of violence and overwhelming military force, with advanced technology largely impotent against struggle born of profound belief.

Democracy allows the community to choose its leaders and entrusts them with a sacred responsibility to protect our fundamental human values. Irrespective of their political orientation the community hopes and expects that its leaders will possess and demonstrate wisdom and will have a sense of perspective on the lessons of history. The community expects that in the face of sometimes great pressures leaders will maintain a sense of proportion and responsibility and demonstrate prudence and consistency in their decisions on important national issues. This has been the national leadership paradigm that has prevailed since the end of the Second World War, despite various periods of great global insecurity.

This paradigm has been shattered in the 21st century with the global ascendance of technology-enabled psychological warfare, with the spectre of terrorism emerging as a universal trigger for a hysterical emotional response. The actions of a disturbed and angry young man brandishing a knife can assume international notoriety by being linked with terrorism. Armed insurgents driving modified 4wds in distant conflicts become a global "death cult". Gruesome images pervade our lives daily. The spectre of terrorism magnifies everything it touches like an explosion, and everyone exposed to a ubiquitous real-time media is at risk.

The inexplicability of this phenomenon is that "we" consciously choose to allow this distortion and emotional over-reaction to occur. We give the power to extremists by attaching the label "terrorist" (and all the fearful things that it connotes), making them the centre of our world. We provide an incentive for extremists to resort to unspeakable barbarity in order to leverage media coverage and attract world attention. We have created and constantly reinforce the horrific images of terrorism which others are now willing to freely exploit. We are prepared to change our way of life to incorporate the spectre of terrorism.

As psychological warfare the spectre of terrorism has a range of insidious consequences in addition to creating a powerful impetus for emulation and perpetuation. Apart from engendering a heightened sense of insecurity in the community, the ill-defined menace of a violent alien in our midst threatens to galvanise latent prejudices about Muslims and Islam. Suspicion exacerbates polarisation and alienation, ultimately tearing at the fabric of our unique pluralist

society. Internationally, the deliberate conflation of terrorism (indiscriminate attacks on civilians) with armed conflicts threatens to once again draw states into an escalating spiral of violence in a "dirty" war where the moral imperatives are blurred.

Regrettably our national leaders have been willing to exploit the community's insecurity and have played a central role in perpetuating an alarming and disproportionate response to the threat of terrorism. The language of death-cult, evil and insidious has been accompanied by simplistic and disingenuous depictions of a "goodies-baddies" conflict. Dire warnings from self-styled security experts of an "existential threat" and "one hundred year war" have dramatically invoked Huntington's "clash of civilisations".

In this fearful environment national leaders are now warning the community that a number of long-established democratic institutions and conventions that have sustained the delicate balance between national security and civil liberties over many years will need to be compromised in the ongoing struggle against "home grown" terrorism. A raft of legislative changes are proposed that will extend significant additional powers to the nation's security services.

A number of these proposed changes not only show no sign of the proportionality or sense of perspective that the community expects from wise and responsible national leaders, but have real potential to degrade the nation's security over the longer term. In 2011 the Director-General of the Office of National Assessments noted that the Australian intelligence community's "strength lies in Justice Hope's recognition that an Australian intelligence system needs to be rooted in Australian interests, values and laws. The structure he recommended was nationally independent, separate from policy-making, subject to firm oversight by Ministers and with all its activities in accordance with Australian law".

The Australian Security Intelligence Organisation, as a predominantly defensive and advisory security agency, currently enjoys wide community support because it operates with probity within an explicit legal and ethical framework and is subject to extensive statutory and parliamentary oversight. Proposed legislative changes giving ASIO new executive powers and authorising its officers to engage in unlawful conduct have the potential to permanently change the nature of that organisation and undermine its vital collaborative partnerships with the Australian community.

Bill Calcutt worked in a range of intelligence roles in the Australian Security Intelligence Organization and the National Crime Authority from the early 1970s till the mid 1990s.